



MACBITER

He may never have had it as good as he has it now, but he's finding it hard to care. MacBiter stifles a yawn as he recalls the ups and downs of a lifelong love affair

I want to paint you a picture – or, if you prefer, run a piece of film – that's about 20 years old. The scene is a London street. It is raining. Towards us strides a tall bloke wearing a downmarket Barbour clone and an expression of fatuous determination. In his right hand, he carries a heavy padded canvas bag of near-cuboid dimensions. Our man is about 40 and has a full barnet, not yet turning grey. His watery blue eyes are alight with a holy fire. Cromwell probably looked like that while ordering Exeter to be put to the sack. Jehovah's Witnesses on the doorstep have the same expression. It is a look to avoid.

The bloke in shot is me, a younger and sleeker MacBiter and – as might be guessed by the fanatical glare in his eyeballs – he is on a mission of proselytisation; entirely at his own

expense, in his own time and for no reason other than to spread the Good Word. Here he comes, stomping through the rain with a faint smile of anticipation on his lips. He is confident that his mission will

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succeed. And what does he carry in that strangely shaped bag? Holy books? A satanist's portable black mass toolkit? A prayer mat? No, something infinitely more potent, as we shall see.

The next scene is an office, with a few people hanging round. Our man, apparently having not even waited to remove his soaking wet parka, is unpacking the canvas bag. He produces a small ivory-coloured item

that looks like a portable television with a rather small screen. A keyboard appears, and another small item about the size of a packet of fags. Eagerly, he connects it all up and switches it on. There is a deep chime.

Then he posts a bit of cardboard into the front. There are faint mechanical noises and the screen lights up. For perhaps two seconds it shows nothing but a blinking question mark, then this changes to a small smiling face and the legend 'Welcome to Macintosh'.

Fascinated, the acolytes cluster round. The Master of Ceremonies takes a deep breath and starts speaking. The service is about to begin.

BACK TO THE FUTURE

Flash forward 20 years and the scene has changed. Our man is sitting – slumped, actually – in a chair beside a window. The view outside is pleasantly rural: there is a lawn, garden path, trees, flowers, birds and a dozing dog. Inside, the room is a hideous mess: boxes, musical instruments, wine bottles, fag packets, fag ash, old newspapers, books and more books, a couple of indecent videos, CDs and computer kit litter the place.

Let us check out the computer in front of which the contemporary MacBiter slumps with such an expression of sour dissatisfaction. It is a sleek, silvery box about 18" high, which is plated here and there with near-chrome, and about twice the height of the Macintosh of 1985.



The 1985 Mac had 128KB of built-in memory and no internal storage whatsoever. This one has over 4,000 times as much RAM and a hard disk of 60GB. In 1985 the Mac ran at a speed of 8MHz. This one is well over 100 times faster, and indeed could be 300 times faster were its owner not such a tightwad.

But it is the screen that shows the most dramatic advance in 20 years of Mac ownership. The 1985 screen was a nine inch square black-and-white cathode ray tube, though the definition was high. This one is 20" square and almost completely flat, and it glows with living colour.

To sum up, the Macintosh computer of 2005 is of a power and superiority undreamed of in 1985, where the little ivory box represented the last word in digital cool. And by the way, it also costs about half as much, including the screen. And I haven't even mentioned the high-definition laser printer in the corner (1985 cost: £7,000) or the astonishing little colour printer whose technology did not exist even in prototype in 1985. And don't get me started on the software.

So what is the contemporary MacBiter's reaction to this dazzling array of kit? The lips shape themselves into a big fat yawn and an idle hand moves downwards to scratch some unmentionable part of the MacBiter anatomy (don't go there). This is not the image of a man on fire with excitement. It is a man who is drowning in ennui soup.

A thunderous, life-denying fart rips through the sordid little room. The man in the chair idly flips his Zippo and waves the flame to and fro to nullify the foetid after-effects, a trick he learned from his grandmother. He pays not the slightest attention to the high technology winking alluringly at him. So what has brought about this terrible and degrading change?

FANBOY FUN

I was a fanatic in the early days of the Mac. There were no lengths to which I would not go to turn somebody on to the little beast.

If I was feeling particularly keen I would even tote my Imagewriter I dot matrix printer along on these missions (dot matrix it may have been, but it was a very good one). Getting someone to draw something in MacPaint and then bunging it out on the printer was a good way of ensuring that the next day they would be in a showroom negotiating the purchase of a Mac 128K (or 512K, as it had by now become. The MacPlus, with a whole megabyte of RAM, was still some way off). I must have personally sold dozens, but I wasn't

doing it for Apple, I was doing it for me. Yes, I was an idiot.

I maintained this level of keenness for some time. But it was hard to defend Apple's pricing, and the Grey Imports crisis of 1988 – the UK public having noted that Macs were 50 per cent more expensive over here than in the USA – took plenty of gilt off the gingerbread. In defending the indefensible, Apple lost valuable public esteem at just the time when the first truly Killer App – desktop publishing (DTP) – was making its debut, with the Mac for once in a commanding position.

DTP renewed my faith in the Mac, not least because here was something I knew about already, which always helps. But no sooner had I established myself as an expert (which I was, provided you define 'expert' as 'a bloke who knows a bit more than your average bloke') than I realised I had projected myself neatly into the soup. I was OK on fonts and basic page design, but the early DTP programs were all black and white (or at most grey) and when the whole thing suddenly grew colour I was hopelessly out of my depth. I found myself out-guru'd for the first time and I don't think my confidence has ever recovered.

Then came the Presentations farce, and it was brought forcibly home to me that the Mac industry was not, after all, free from the most outrageous hyping mechanisms. You may not remember, but in about 1989 the IT market was saturated for a full year with the virtues of lining up your business proposals in the form of coloured charts and then projecting them on the wall. Naturally, there was kit and software that could help you to do this. This nonsense actually became an important application category, despite scoffings from people like me who had never once in their lives felt any need to project their innermost thoughts, hopes dreams and fears on the wall in the form of coloured charts.

This was the first occasion I can remember in which, instead of a need being identified and an application being written to fulfill it, the opposite procedure occurred. An application had been developed in the course of pure R&D, and a need was therefore concocted in order to sell it.

Exactly the same thing happened with a famous piece of contemporary software, HyperCard. Instead of being sold as a piece of hobbyist fun, it was promoted, by Apple itself, as an

application builder, and many people went for it in a big way. The truth was that although you could construct applications with HyperCard (of course, you had to use HyperCard to run them), these could never be as good as the real, runtime thing. And they weren't. Where are the



bloke who has had his arse bitten several times too many and is now giving the animal a wider berth.

But edging back from the brink also means giving up any remnant of gurudom. Some of this I can live with; no more late night phone calls beginning with, "Hi! You don't know me but Sumdam Phule gave me your number and I was wondering..." The most aggravating aspect is that the current tribe of real Mac gurus is able to patronise me effortlessly, with the same pitying smile that I once deployed when decoding an acronym or explaining what a bus was. I used to find this intolerable, but these days I just smile knowingly. They too will pass this way one day.

So there you have it. That's the story of how the burning zeal of the true believer gradually metamorphosed into weary cynicism over a score of years. There were no Stalingrads, no Verduns; just a series of small victories for old man reality on all fronts –

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hyperstores now? When did you last see a presentation? It was all bullshit.

OUT OF THE LOOP

Then there were the Apple Expos. Originally these were palaces of fascination to me, but after a few years it dawned on me that I was paying a fortune and exhausting myself for days in order to eyeball a lot of kit that I couldn't afford. It's now been more than a decade since I last visited one, and that's the way it is going to stay.

All this told on my morale, together with the steady fading of my once-vaunted expertise. Partly this was due to my conscious desire to slip back a bit from the leading edge. Until the Mac IIx (circa 1989) I had made it a point always to own the very latest and most potent kit. To do this with the IIx was so damned expensive – and such a rip-off, frankly – that I swore thereafter to let others do all the beta-testing and pay twice as much for the privilege, and since then I have always been at least a generation behind.

This, you will agree, is not the attitude of a fanatic, or even of an aficionado. It is the attitude of a wary

moral, fiscal, experiential – that gradually wore me down and dulled the holy flame in my eyes, even as the kit itself got steadily more and more fantastic. The cool factor, originally for having any kind of computer, afterwards for owning a Mac, also diminished as time passed. Windows got better and Apple revealed itself repeatedly, in a moral sense, to be nothing more than Microsoft writ small.

And now I slump in front of this glittering 21st century beast and wonder what the hell to write about. And behind me, on a shelf, sits my original Mac, twice upgraded from 128KB via 512KB to 1MB MacPlus. It will never run again, but it looks intact, although two decades of tobacco smoke have turned it a rich golden brown, like a fine meerschaum pipe.

Presumably there's a strong symbolic resonance here. I must take the trouble one day to work out what it is. **CS**

CONTACT

MACBITER

macbiter@computershopper.co.uk